



# *When We Teachers Walk Through the Door— New Teachers, Take Note*

**Nicole Lamartine**  
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As I was teaching a conducting lesson last week, we deconstructed the rehearsal segment the student had led in front of one of my choirs. Tamara said, “I just didn’t feel good, and I had too much going on in my head from all of my classes, and we had a performance that afternoon... and...and...and...” She stopped, looked down, and then so earnestly looked me in the eyes. Tamara asked, “When you are having a bad day, how do you always have energy, and how are you always positive for rehearsals?”

I stammered and didn’t know what to say. I had never thought about how I mentally or physically prepare for teaching every day, especially if I don’t feel good, have frustrations, or feel overwhelmed. It is very much in my nature to “suck it up, buttercup.” I had never thought through the preparations and choices I make to put me in a productive and positive mental state.

The preparation is most likely different for introverts and extroverts, and I write specifically from an introvert perspective. I am writing this article for Tamara, and I’ve tried to put on paper some of the things that have helped me on those days like I believe she had experienced. I hope these ideas might help you, too, in your teaching.

## **Practice**

Preparation to walk through the door takes practice. It is a choice. I’m not quite sure when I learned that what I bring into the rehearsal is what I get out of it. It takes a lot of dedication to commit to only bringing in what we want. All decisions begin with a choice to accomplish our goal for the day. In making a choice, we begin to practice what we want to be every day, as a person, as a teacher, and as a musician. Choose to practice those qualities.

Preparation can begin in your office, in your car on the way to work, or wherever you can find focus and excitement about what you will accomplish in the class. It can also be as you walk to the classroom, unlock the door, and greet the students. Most importantly, it can also be part of the collective warm-up process for the ensemble.

## **It’s Not about You, but Be You**

Remember that this rehearsal is not about you. As soon as we release self-consciousness, self-judgment, and perceived student judgment, we can be true and honest humans. I believe people respond to that. Our students can see through

our trying to be a certain way. Love yourself for what you bring to the rehearsal. You will learn from the students what you can be. There is no need to take yourself so seriously. Yes, hold yourself and your students to high standards, but be you!

### **Acknowledge Each Person**

Enter the room with love, not with an agenda or rehearsal plan or emotional baggage from a prior meeting. Love. People feel it when you look into their eyes. It is a gift. Give it freely. A high-five, a handshake, fist bump, or elbow tap acknowledges a true greeting to each individual.

### **Breathe before You Open the Door**

Take deep breaths, three in a row before opening the door, even when students are asking questions as you take those breaths.

### **Live an Example for Students Even if You Feel Goofy**

Know that you influence someone's day. Why not choose to make it a great one by living the example? Who cares if you feel goofy? You might make someone smile. A student will remember this rehearsal for one reason some day.

### **Allow Your Cup to be Filled**

Give. Give. Give. It is by giving that we receive. When we feel like we are completely drained, physically or emotionally, that's when it is hardest to give of ourselves in rehearsals. I've found that when all I need is to be filled, the door to that fulfillment opens when I give something to my students first—a smile, a moment of laughter, a beautiful moment of music, a realization of text meaning. Be open and allow your own cup to be filled.

### **Do Something Amazing Every Day with the People who ARE There**

Make the best music you can with the people in front of you at any given moment. This adage I got from Jonathan Talberg, and it has served me well. There will always be students missing from rehearsal because of illness or an activity or sports conflicts, or ditching. We are there to do something

amazing every day—for the people who ARE there.

### **Energy**

Create an expectation of energy. Each conductor/teacher/leader will operate best with the energy that is most fulfilling to that person. For me, I feel uncomfortable when there is silence as my students enter the room. I would rather see, experience, and be a part of their interactive energy. If I feel that the energy is too low, I bring it up with physical activity (for my Statesmen Choir, for instance) or interactive activities like “tell three people why you appreciate them in this choir.”

### **Let it go**

Have a mantra. When you don't feel like you can make it through the hour, the afternoon, or the day, tell yourself that you can because we teachers must be the best possible self for our students. I often find myself with the soundtrack of “Let it go” from Frozen running through my head.

### **Smile**

Smile, even when you think you can't. Let it begin on the outside to become true on the inside.

### **Is it a “You” Problem**

Choose a positive response. “So, when IS the concert?” “I don't have that piece.” “I can't see you.” After providing significant information, establishing a procedure for music distribution or borrowing for the day, and wearing my high heels, it is easy for me to get irked at these questions and statements. There seems to be a sense of entitlement with students recently in which they feel as if because they were not told personally, hand-held through a process, or if someone is blocking their view, that it is somehow my problem, not theirs. A dear friend of mine (in tech, not teaching) said he would respond to a student by saying “that sounds like a you problem.” At first, I was surprised at his candor, but I've been able to take his statement and transform it for my conversations with the students. “You have the ability and a choice to change that, and I invite you to do so.”

### **But How Did They Feel?**

People will forget what you did, but they'll never forget how you made them feel (Maya Angelou). Feelings and emotions are transparent and transferrable. I try to walk into every rehearsal with my best emotional goals for the atmosphere in the room: joy, acceptance, excellence, and openness. And it always comes to pass that great music is made when I hold these atmospheric goals in mind. Over and over, students will recount stories. "Remember that time when..." with descriptions of what they felt at the time. Very rarely do they include the title of the work we were singing or the beautifully-tuned chord or a perfect vowel. We remember and learn deeply from emotions.

### **Connect**

Look your students in the eye, every individual. During the front matter of the rehearsal, scan the ensemble. By setting a standard of appropriate connection, students are better able to connect with others and engage fully in a rehearsal. Reach the tender souls in your ensemble.

### **Engagement/Purpose**

For whom or for what are you singing today? This is my mantra. It came to me after one of those really trying rehearsals where I just wanted to throw in the towel. I asked myself this question, and then the next day in rehearsal, I asked the students. Thinking they would hold their answers only in their minds, I was surprised when a shy voice offered, "my mom." Then others chimed in until almost everyone in the room had said something. The music we then created had utmost engagement and purpose.

### **Take in What You Need.**

#### **Let Go of What You Don't Need**

Breathe together. I'll often lead breathing exercises that are meant to focus the mind and body, but sometimes this exercise is really for me. More and more, students are plagued by depression, anxiety, and insomnia. We must teach them how to clear the mind and to switch gears for a place of creativity in which they get to make choices and are not told what to do by a screen. We should breathe with this phrase: "Take in what you need from the universe and let go of what you don't."

### **If We Choose, We Are in Control**

Have to versus choose to. When we exchange "have to" for "choose to", wondrous things can happen! The simple act of acknowledging that we have a choice to walk into the classroom or not produces a great sense of ownership and power. When we "have to" do something, we sound victimized and small. If we choose, then we are in control, and that is a feeling that is essential for running rehearsals, I believe.

### **Notice the Sparkles**

Wear clothes that make you happy. I have a pair of children's pink-sequined flats. I wouldn't normally wear these crazy shoes, but sometimes I do because they simply make me smile. As I walk through the building to rehearsal, I watch my feet sparkling back and forth across the floor and that reminds me that we have moments everyday where we can choose to notice the little things or not. When I notice my sparkles, it makes me happy, and I feel ready for rehearsal. I have various bright colored or printed clothes, and I wear them when I wake up with that heavy feeling in the morning—that feeling of how will I make it through this day? Feeling happy on the outside helps you to feel happy on the inside.

### **Keep Love Notes**

Keep a file of love notes. If you don't already have one, begin a file or keep a box in which you keep those special notes, cards, and mementos from students that remind you why this profession is so amazing. Remind yourself, before teaching a class, of the impact you have on people's lives and why that is important. My Collegiate Chorale writes notes on paper plates at the end of each semester (this idea came from Leslie Guelker-Cone). Each singer wears a paper plate tied with a string on his or her back. The choir members take turns writing something special about that person on that person's plate. I treasure these comments, and I know the students do, too.

### **Yes, You Love that Piece of Music, but...**

Rehearse and perform the music that you love. Look forward to it! When I am excited about the music, it's like a volcano of excitement. My students laugh at me because I love our various works so much. But sometimes you must have a divorce with a work, and that's OK. The piece that



once spoke to you deeply does not connect with the students, or it is too challenging, etc. You still love the music, but it is not the right time in life for you and that music to be together. Avoid the struggle. Put it aside. It is not an indication of failure.

### **Three Rules to Consider**

Show up. Tell the truth. Don't be burdened by the outcome. These three rules come from Craig Hella Johnson. I scribbled them on the inside cover of a piece of music I was singing with *Conspirare* many years ago, and they have stuck with me. Being present, physically, is half the battle of preparing for rehearsal. Be there because your students need you. Honesty in music making and expression come from a place of vulnerability. This is crucial to the demonstration of our humanness. The product is so much less important than the process, in my opinion.

The journey begins every day when we choose to walk through the door! 